

MORE THAN WORDS

ISSUE & POLICY PRIORITIES



RAISE THE AGE ON THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM

More Than Words endorses moving emerging adults, ages 18-20, out of the adult justice system and into the more developmentally appropriate juvenile system. This will align with brain science research, extend effective diversion strategies and services, increase public safety, and advance equity.

Young people's brains continue to mature until their early-to-mid-20s:

- Adolescents' brains are measurably different from adults. Adolescents are more likely to be influenced by peers, and engage in risky and impulsive behaviors.
- Courts, agencies and practitioners should use this knowledge to ensure a developmentally appropriate response.

An overly punitive approach leads to more offending:

- Toxic environments, like adult jails and prisons, increase problematic behaviors and recidivism.
- Teens and young adults incarcerated in Massachusetts' adult correctional facilities have a 55% re-conviction rate, compared to a similar profile of non-incarcerated teens whose re-conviction rate is 22%.

Massachusetts' young men of color bear the harshest brunt of these policies:

- Only 25% of Massachusetts' young adult population is Black or Latino, but 70% of young adults incarcerated in state prisons and 57% of young adults incarcerated in county jails are people of color.
- Black and Latino young adults are 3.2 and 1.7 times as likely to be imprisoned as their white peers.

It will build an educated workforce, increase opportunity, and save the Commonwealth money:

- Young people detained or committed to DYS are mandated to attend school every day and have easier access to special education resources, decreasing their likelihood of dropping out of high school.
- An adult record creates a barrier for employment, education, professional licensure, and service in the armed forces.
- There is a strong relationship between dropping out of school and criminal involvement: 40% of people in state prison and 47% in jails have not completed high school. A single dropout would cost taxpayers \$292,000.

It will align services for emerging adults with child- and adolescent-serving agencies:

- Emerging adults may receive Department of Children and Families services up to age 23. However, if they enter the adult criminal legal system those services, especially those from child-serving agencies, can be severed.
- Adult system involvement is a serious impediment for continuity of connections to service providers and mentors.

More Than Words (MTW) is nonprofit social enterprise that empowers youth ages 16-24 who are in the foster care system, court involved, homeless, or out of school to take charge of their lives by taking charge of a business. At locations in Boston and Waltham, MTW serves 380 of our most vulnerable youth each year. Youth run a \$3.7M business, working paid jobs ~20 hours per week and learning critical skills, while simultaneously working a paid "YOU" job learning life skills and making progress in education, work, and life. After 6-12 months youth continue to receive proactive support in a Career Services Program for 2 years to secure jobs in the community, complete their high school diploma or equivalent, pursue post-secondary credentials, and advance along their career pathway.